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David Fincher's Harsh Mercy: Guns in Hollywood Compositions

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Comments

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“David Fincher’s Harsh Mercy: Guns in Hollywood Compositions”

Disclaimer about violent images.

(**SLIDE 1**) Many of us have read and taught Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” which ends with a punchy final line. The murderous Misfit, who has just shot and killed the grandmother, says of her that: “She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.” This line conflates morality, the threat of death, and behavior, implicating the Grandmother’s hypocrisy and renewed religiosity at the end of the story.

What’s also strange about this scene, especially for my students, is the horrific aspect of it. The Misfit, who threatens the grandmother with a gun, actually shoots and kills her. Most of my students are used to gun scenes where death is not a threat, where the triggers are not pulled; instead, guns are used as mere tensions builders, as pseudo-threats that go nowhere. If (**SLIDE 2**) two protagonists in an action movie or TV show walk into a bar, or a warehouse, or the hangar deck of spaceship—neither knowing each other and both being hunted for crimes they did not commit—they will both draw their guns on each other. They will yell, “Who are you?” or “Freeze!” or “Put it down!” while unnecessarily cocking their guns. Then one character recognizes something about the other. The tension is resolved, the guns are lowered, both of them become friends and partners.

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As experienced viewers, we never really believed that, after the guns were drawn, that either gun would be fired. This scene is clichéd, and it reduces the psychologically complex horror of having a gun put to your head down to a dull kind of viewer excitement. Yet this kind of clichéd scene has long populated films and TV shows, which I think O'Connor story reacts against.

In the hands of skilled artists, though, this kind of scene isn't clichéd. It can contain psychological, philosophical, and theological complexity of a high artistic order. **(SLIDE 3)** In my view, director David Fincher exploits the cliché of the gun-to-the-head scene, along with audience numbness to it, in key scenes in three of his first four films. These include *Alien3*, *Se7en*, and *Fight Club*. Fincher has repeatedly exploited tense gun scenes to ask questions about free will and determinism and the enduring trauma for victims of threatened violence by guns. In these movies, Fincher even asks a brutal question, one O'Connor might like: what if it were possibly better or more gracious that the guns were fired and that the protagonist dies instead of lives? Fincher poses this question and others in movies with explicit religious themes and settings, thereby foregrounding the mercy/justice dichotomy as an inescapably theological, not a secular, issue. For Fincher, potential killers may choose to *not* shoot their victims, which results in a harsher justice for these victims than if they had been shot. In short, Fincher's films force audiences to consider whether mercy is a greater weapon, in a sense, than a gun.

Let me begin with a distant predecessor of the shots you see in this slide. In John Ford's *Stagecoach*, the movie climaxes during a stagecoach chase in which a stagecoach full of American citizens is pursued viciously by Apaches. In fact,

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the movie climaxes with this very shot. (**SLIDE 4**). Here we see something that, for long-time movie watchers does not appear very troubling. My students, perhaps representative of modern viewers, have no reaction to this; they know that this character, Mrs. Mallory, is not in any trouble, even though it looks like it. Because of clichéd scenes where guns are mere props to amplify tension, they are desensitized to what actually is happening here.

Compositionally, the threat is obvious: she might be shot by an unseen murderer. And if she is shot, we will see a moment of horrific violence. Why is the gun pointed at her head? Her caretaker, a Southern gentleman and gambler named Hatfield, does not want her to be captured by the Apaches. He believes, by killing her, that he is saving her. Interestingly, she does not know the gun is pointed at her head. She's praying here, or perhaps talking to herself, but this seems to be a moment of stark piety for her. She's acted snobbishly throughout the movie, harshly treating a prostitute who's been a fellow traveler with her in the stagecoach. Now she might pay for that.

This kind of shot, in my view, reinforces mid-20C American social conventions about religious faith—act pious or repentant when in dire straits, but the direction of repentance can be pluralistic and general, the kind of thing that the Grandmother exemplifies in much of “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” We don't know who or what Mrs. Mallory here is praying or talking to. But she is saved. As this shot is on-screen, we hear a gunshot, but not from the gun in the frame. The would-be killer here, Hatfield, is shot and killed. He drops the gun, and as this happens the U.S. cavalry rides into the scene in the very next shot, as we hear the bugle blow. Mrs. Mallory's prayers have been answered.

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(**SLIDE 5**) Contrast this shot with David Fincher's moment in an underappreciated film, the heavily religious *Alien3*. The *Alien3* shot (on the bottom) does not involve a gun—instead a protruding alien head coming out of an alien. But as we'll see, it strongly resembles other similar shots of guns-to-heads in Fincher movies. Both *Stagecoach* and *Alien3* feature women threatened by violence. (**SLIDE 6**) Both are on the right side of the screen, while the would-be murder weapon is on the left. *Stagecoach* is a close shot in which Mrs. Mallory is angled 20 degrees away from us, while *Alien3* is a shot in which Ridley faces us. It's a flatter composition, although the wall in the background is receding diagonally toward the left. These are shots of existential terror, of possible female violation, though Ridley, unlike Mrs. Mallory, is aware that she can die.

This is the first of three Fincher films I'd like to briefly look at, in which the gun-handling serial killer does not execute the threat of firing the gun. Instead, the protagonist in each case is let go mercifully. But this is not the clichéd scenario I described earlier, nor a sort of talking-killer scenario. All three films ask whether mercy is harsher than death. Mercy, in the hands of these killers is a greater weapon than the gun, a warped, seeming exoneration that leads to a critical choice. After each protagonist is released, he/she will face an impossible choice near the end of the film.

(**SLIDE 7**) Ridley in *Alien3*, for example, is not killed only because she's hosting an alien inside her. The adult alien wants the fetal alien to gestate and “hatch.” The result for Ridley would be a brutal death in which the baby alien emerges from her abdomen—with its attendant parental, sexual, and ecological symbolisms. Her final choice in the film is to either die by alien birth or die by

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suicide. She chooses the latter, falling into an industrial flame, a purifying fire of sorts that burns her clean of the alien creature. (I say purifying fire in part because she is resurrected in a sense in the next Alien film, Alien Resurrection.)

(SLIDE 8) Fincher's 1995 film *Seven*, like *Alien3*, is explicitly theological. A serial killer elaborately plans seven themed murders, structured by the seven deadly sins. The detectives who hunt him, played by Morgan Freeman and Brad Pitt, use leads from, among other things, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In this shot, Brad Pitt's character, detective Mills, is threatened with execution by the unknown serial killer. Detective Mills has chased the killer from his apartment to a back alley, where the killer gained the upper-hand.

This particular shot alters we saw in *Alien3*. Again, the protagonist has a gun to his head at a 90-degree angle, with the background at a diagonal. Although here he is turned from us about 45 degrees, and the gun enters the frame from the top, not the side.

This shot begins a short, but remarkable 20-second sequence in which seven shots are 8chiastically structured. **(SLIDE 9)**. By chiasm I mean that the first shot and last shot of the 7 are the same, the 2nd and 6th are the same, the 3rd and 5th are the same. Here they are. One in the top left and #7 in the bottom right. 2 and 6 are in the middle. 3 and 5 are top right and bottom left.

During this sequence, the serial killer decides not to murder Detective Mills. We don't yet know why he acts mercifully; plot-wise, it seems to make little sense.

As you may know, in many chiasms, biblical chiasms included, the central point or line of the chiasm is its focal point. I have omitted it from this

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particular slide, but here it is. **(SLIDE 10)**. Here Morgan Freeman's character, the world-weary Detective Somerset, runs toward the foreground, which is towards Detective Mills.

Why is this image the central shot of the sequence? One reason is that Somerset will become a sort of conscience or guide-figure for Mills at the end of the movie. *Seven* contrasts Somerset's methodical, patient work with Mills' hectic overeagerness: Somerset is the one who goes to the library to read Dante in order to find the serial killer, while Mills would rather hunt and chase him.

This dichotomy manifests itself clearly in the final scene **(SLIDE 11)**, in which Somerset pleads with Mills to not shoot and kill the serial killer John Doe, played by Kevin Spacey. Here the roles are reversed. Mills threatens to kill John Doe with his gun. This is because Doe has brought the two detectives into the open desert for the worst of surprises: he has killed Mills' pregnant wife, and now he wants Mills to shoot him to complete his artistic performance. (John Doe killing the wife models the sin of envy, while Mills killing Doe would model wrath.) Somerset, here linked visually with John Doe in the shot on the bottom, pleads with Mills to not give into wrath. "If you shoot him, he wins," says Somerset. This line is amplified by the low-angle shot and the lines pointed to Mills (who is out of the frame): the power lines, Somerset's gesture, Spacey's body angle.

Mills, however, gives into wrath. He shoots John Doe, and you can see that while he's making this terrible decision, he's in close-up and his gun, out of focus, is pointed at the camera. While this is not a POV shot, we get a sense of John Doe's perspective. This is much like *Alien3*, which does use many POV shots from the alien's perspective.

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Thus Mills' choice. He can either let the killer go, or avenge his wife's death. Like Ridley's choice at the end of *Alien3*, forced by the alien's mercy, this choice is an impossible one. Somerset implicitly argues that Mills should be as merciful to the killer as the killer was to Mills. Again, I suspect that this is in part why he is the central shot in the chiasm I showed you: he intervenes between violent acts.

Yet John Doe, by letting Mills go earlier in the movie, forced him into this position. We are actually shown why Mills makes his decision. Fincher inserts a subliminal clip, a very quick shot of Mills' wife. First-time viewers may not even see this; it's hard to notice in a shot-by-shot viewing. But the image of Mills' wife as a memory, a reminder, a trigger. This quick, subliminal shot is something we'll see in the denouement of *Fight Club*, appearing just after a scene in which a gun is pointed at the protagonist.

(SLIDE 12) *Fight Club* is Fincher's fourth film, and it begins nearly where *Seven* ends. With Brad Pitt threatening a potential victim with a gun. Here is the first shot of the movie, in which the opening credits segue into the camera sliding up the gun barrel to the sight, in focus pictured on the top. Then it switches focuses to the victim's face—the anonymous narrator, played by Edward Norton. You can see the play on imagery here—the face of the gun sight is the face of the narrator, two eyes and a nose. The narrator, threatened with the gun, is somehow not threatened with the gun, but the gun himself.

The next shot frames the film. **(SLIDE 13)** We've seen this one in the other Fincher movies I've mentioned, so it is rich with intertextual references—not just with Brad Pitt's presence, but with the gun pointed by an unseen person, pointed at the head of a victim in close shot. Here there's a difference

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though: the composition is flat. This I think signals the narrator's schizophrenia and his lack of empathy for his victims and his followers. Of course, the narrator is a schizophrenic, famously doubled by Brad Pitt's character, Tyler Durden, an ultra-masculine, sociopathic character who contrasts with the emasculated narrator. (Thus the sexual symbolism in this shot, as with I think some of the others we've seen.) This second shot of the movie is repeated near the end, at the 130 minute mark, when Tyler Durden asks "where were we?", a postmodern reference to the beginning of the movie that he's within.

Again, with *Alien3* and *Seven*, the gun-toter lets the victim go. Durden would rather talk the narrator into his planned detonation and destruction of the surrounding cityscape. The narrator, however, acknowledges and tries to combat his schizophrenia. He realizes that gun is really in his hand, not in the hand of the imaginary Tylen Durden. And yet when Durden says "Why do want to put a gun to your head?" the narrator responds that it's not his head, but "our head"—a line that seems to double back on the narrator's acknowledgement of his schizophrenia, or even a dual self.

So Durden did not kill the narrator; he let him go, mercifully. But the narrator's solution is to shoot Tyler, to shoot himself. We see him point the gun at himself and fire it. Then he miraculously survives, and in the denouement, he gets his girlfriend and in bliss watches the cityscape blow up, with his neck shot. **(SLIDE 14)** I think the denouement in *Fight Club* can be viewed as the last scene in *Taxi Driver*, to which I compare Fincher's movie in this slide, as a kind of imagined fantasy or wishful thinking of the main character. The narrator of *Fight Club* may be dead when he shot himself, but we see his dreams. This is a

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harsh and terrible ending; indeed many critics have said that the movie glorifies the hyper masculinity and fascist or terrorist politics that it depicts.

I think that this view of *Fight Club* is a misreading of Fincher. As we've seen, he complicates the choices, and assumptions behind the decisions, of the characters who are threatened by guns. *Fight Club* seems to have the "happiest" of endings to his movies, but not only is the narrator seemingly more perverted than when Tyler Durden existed, but there's a subliminal shot of a naked lower-half of a man's body that quickly plays in the denouement, as the skyscrapers are detonated. This shot is a reference to one of Tyler Durden's favorite pastimes; as a projectionist working at movie theaters, he spliced pornography in movie reels. The pornographic shot at the end suggests that Tyler is actually alive, that he in fact authored, crafted, or edited in some way at least part of the film.

Fight Club is the last Fincher movie I found where (**SLIDE 15**) a shot like this is featured as one of the most important moments in his films. But I think these movies exemplify key themes in his later work—the impossibility of choice; the hazards of free will, the existential loneliness of all people. All of these are featured in his films from the last fifteen years—including *The Social Network*, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, and the great *Zodiac*. There the protagonists each face isolation, loneliness, confusion, friendlessness, perhaps even nihilism. Think of *The Social Network*, where in the last scene Mark Zuckerberg desperately refreshes his Facebook page, hopefully that his former girlfriend will befriend him on Facebook. Or *Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, in which Lisbeth Salander is ditched by Mikhael Blomquist and then rides off into the horizon on her motorcycle, hurt, alone. This is what the characters in the movies on the slide face. It's a bleak view of the world, but it may at least

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describe the terrible complexities of gun violence, including the horror of having a gun pointed to your head.